1971: Imagine that’s the B-side

(30 July - 2 August 1971)

To be at the Bangladesh Concert was a thrill in itself, but for me the whole weekend was bizarre. Arriving in New York the previous day I’d discovered that John, whom I’d expected to see, had left after a row with Yoko when George Harrison wouldn’t agree to her being on stage, and had flown back to Paris. (Yoko thought he should have fought harder for her.) I’d also arrived without my bags, which had been mislaid *en route* by Pan American.

Yoko had a problem, too. She wanted to follow John, but had invited her younger sister, Setsuko, over from Switzerland where she was a postgraduate student. In a moment she solved two problems. I should cancel my single room, move into one of the several bedrooms in the Lennons’ suite, wear John’s clothes until mine turned up, and take care of her sister over the weekend.

And, oh, yes, to enable me to do this her new assistant May Pang (whom I’d met in London) would help organise things. Setsuko and I would have the use of the stretch limo and chauffeur, money would be provided for anything we needed, we’d have front row seats at the concert and all I had to do was sign everything “Lennon + 15%”.

And that’s what happened: me in John’s French black leather jacket and his gingham shirt, hurrying with Setsuko across the stage at Madison Square Gardens at the end of the concert to get down to the row of nine waiting limousines, which then revved up the ramp and out on to the New York streets like a Presidential motorcade, police motorcycle outriders

flanking the procession as all the way to the post-gig party other police held back the cross town traffic.

"Glad you got a buzz out of it," John said casually when, back in London, I called him. "What did you think of being a Beatle?"

I'd liked it.

In September I was down at Tittenhurst Park again. John had finished *Imagine* and wanted me to hear it. Playing a demo for me in, as usual, his and Yoko's bedroom, he first had me listen to *Give Me Some Truth.* That, he said, was going to be the A-side of his next single. I was disappointed. "What's on the other side?" I asked. Then he played *Imagine*.

"Surely that's the A-side," I said.

He turned to Yoko. "Ray thinks *Imagine* should be the A-side, Yoko."

"Oh good," she replied.

He smiled. "I'm glad you like *Imagine*. I like that one, too."

Of course, I'm sure he knew all along that *Imagine* would be the new single. He just wanted to see what I'd say, probably to confirm his own opinion that it was one of his best songs ever.

At that time, as well as my job on the *Evening Standard* I'd begun moonlighting by helping find guests for the new Michael Parkinson chat how on BBC-TV and told them I could probably get them John Lennon. Parkinson was all for it, but the producer wasn't so sure, afraid that John might do something outrageous.

In the end John and Yoko were on for the first half of the show, to be replaced by the safe but predictable film actor Trevor Howard for the second part. Big mistake. John was witty and self-deprecating, and Yoko was revealed to the British public as having a sense of humour. I watched from behind the cameras as John kept the studio audience laughing.

"We should have had him and Yoko on for the full programme," Parkinson said afterwards. "We will next time."

There never was a next time. A few days later they left England for New York. John never returned.

It was, however, in Arizona that she found her vocation. Reluctantly accompanying a friend to a photography appreciation class, she became hooked on the frozen image. She bought a camera and a roll of film and started her career.

Dropping out of college, she returned with her baby to New York, took a two-room apartment on the East Side of Central Park and got a job in reception and opening the mail on a fashion magazine. Meanwhile she went on learning her trade with a camera. It was 1966, and when an invitation to the launch of the Rolling Stones album *Aftermath* appeared in the magazine's post, she took it for herself. It was her lucky break.

Years later she told Nicholas Claxton for a BBC Arena film: "They were holding the launch on a boat and I blabbed my way on to it. They didn't have enough room for all the photographers, but the woman running it said I could go. I thought: 'My God, I'm not really a photographer. Does she know?' But my real worry was whether the pictures would come out."

They did better than come out. There was a casual intimacy about them. The Stones had obviously been flirting with her. The pictures sold widely. And, in a New York jumping with the rock energy that had exploded in London a couple of years earlier, other commissions soon followed. Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison of the Doors, Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin, Neil Young, Simon and Garfunkel, Frank Zappa and the Mamas and the Papas quickly found their way into her portfolio. As far as rock was concerned, she photographed pretty well everybody who was anybody of the time. Completely self-taught, she was very good and suddenly very hot. And by 1967 she was in London meeting Paul McCartney.

Paul had always been a ladies man. From losing his virginity with a baby-sitter when he was 14 to his affairs with girls he met in Hamburg and in the Cavern in Liverpool, and later on tours around the world, women flocked to him. And, like almost any other young man in that situation, he enjoyed himself.

His only long-term adult relationship after becoming famous had, however, been with Jane Asher. To the public Paul and Jane seemed the ideal, young, metropolitan couple. Both attractive and talented, theirs was considered a fairytale romance. Except it wasn't quite like that.

Jane, the daughter of a Harley Street doctor and a musician, was a modern woman, intent on having a career. Although Jane's parents treated

him as one of the family, when it came to women, and despite all his girlfriends, Paul held some conservative, Northern, working-class views.

For whatever reasons, he never gave Jane the commitment he was later to give Linda. And when Jane returned home unexpectedly from a tour and found him in bed with another girl, the relationship was finished. Jane's mother turned up with a suitcase the following day. The next week Jane appeared on the BBC Simon Dee television show and, caught unawares, admitted that her relationship with Paul was over.

A few months later Jane, by then living in a tiny, rented flat told me how naïve she'd been so far as other girls were concerned. But there were other problems. She was also unhappy about drugs, which were as common among rock stars then as they are now, and definitely not thrilled by Paul's friendship with some of the Rolling Stones. Perhaps Jane wanted Paul to be something other than what he was, more like the young man in the public image of the perfect couple. But that wasn't what he wanted.

More important to Paul than his relationship with Jane was his partnership with John Lennon, whom he'd met shortly after his mother died of breast cancer (the same illness from which Linda was to die) when he was 14. In his emotional vacuum, Paul had turned to music and joined John's skiffle group the Quarrymen. And when John's mother was also to die in a hit-and-run accident just over a year later, the friendship had intensified with a shared sense of loss.

And so it was to remain as adulthood and fame arrived, and the girls came and went, and, in John's case, a wife as well. As a song-writing partnership they seemed forged together. But when, at the height of their success, just a few weeks after the release of *Sergeant Pepper,* their manager Brian Epstein was found dead from an overdose of sleeping pills the unravelling of the Beatles was about to begin.

They continued to work, of course. They managed themselves, becoming businessmen as well as artists, but they loathed that side of things. There was, however, to be one fortuitous outcome of being a businessman. Exactly a year after their first encounter, Paul met Linda again when she contacted him while he was on business in New York. They only had time for a chat and a couple of photographs for her in the limousine on the way back to the airport, but she gave him her phone number.

A few weeks later Paul called and invited Linda to join him at another business meeting in Los Angeles. For two days they stayed together in a bungalow in the grounds of the Beverly Hills Hotel on Sunset Boulevard. Slowly but surely they were coming together, just as certainly as John and Paul were breaking apart.

John had fallen in love with Yoko Ono, and, increasingly fuelled by hard drugs, seemed bent on destroying what Paul saw as his life's work. Losing interest in the Beatles, he had less time for Paul. The two could no longer write or record freely together without Yoko offering advice. Her presence put Paul off and John didn't care.

Paul was finding himself abandoned. Outwardly super-confident, inwardly he was growing increasingly insecure. There were girls all around him, of course. He couldn't get rid of some of them, but he needed someone special at his side. He sent for Linda.

She turned up in London in the autumn of 1968 as the final mixing sessions for the *White Album* were taking place. And after that she never went away again. When I first met her at Abbey Road it never occurred to me that this would be the woman with whom Paul would want to spend the rest of his life, although perhaps I should have guessed she was already special by the way he immediately scooped up her daughter Heather and put her on his shoulders. I suppose by not displaying a shred of vanity or falseness, Linda just seemed too nice, too ordinary. But perhaps, like everybody else, I'd been missing the clues in the songs.

Looking back it's possible to see a yearning for domesticity emerging in so many of Paul's lyrics *Lady Madonna, Martha My Dear, Mother Nature's Son, Golden Slumbers, Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, Your Mother Should Know, The Long And Winding Road, When I'm Sixty Four.* It was as though, dissatisfied with his life, he was already looking for a different way.

He was living in a mansion, but, despite the Magrittes, the Aubrey Beardsleys and the Adam fireplace, it was a dark, pigsty of a place, with the hairs of Martha, his Old English sheepdog, everywhere, mates dropping in and crashing, and nothing in the fridge to eat.
As his father Jim used to laugh as he retreated to Liverpool after a couple of days with his son: "I can't take any more."

For a couple of weeks Paul showed Linda around London. Then with the *White Album* finished, she showed him New York, and gave him his

first glimpse of how life could be outside the bedlam of the Beatles. “It’s permitted,” she would say to him when he wanted to do the most ordinary, un-starry things.

Staying in her tiny two-room apartment, he grew a beard, dressed in second-hand clothes, and went around Manhattan unrecognised, going to galleries, clubs and movies, baby-sitting Heather when Linda had to work.

He looked like a Russian revolutionary, but for the first time in years he wasn’t on public display. And he loved it. Linda was teaching him about the life he’d been missing, cocooned as he’d been inside the bandwagon he’d help to create. He could have had anything in the world but he’d already lived ten times the life of any average young man of his age. What he wanted was as normal a life as possible. And with Heather, Linda’s daughter, he already had, as he said, “a ready-made family”.

A few weeks later, in December 1968, Paul, Linda and Heather suddenly turned up unannounced for a quick holiday at the home in Portugal of *The Beatles* biographer Hunter Davies and his wife, novelist Margaret Forster. They stayed for two weeks. Linda was already pregnant with their first daughter, Mary. And while they were there Paul proposed.

Three months later I heard a rumour that they were to be married. Catching Paul at the Beatles’ Apple headquarters in Savile Row, he told me they wanted a quiet wedding. A quiet wedding for a Beatle in the centre of London in 1969 was impossible. A crowd of media and fans were outside the Marylebone Town Hall register office in cold, driving rain the next morning.

“Don’t forget to write that the bride wore a big smile,” Linda told me back at Paul’s house in St John’s Wood afterwards. They stayed there for a couple of hours, then secretly slipped out for a church blessing from the local rector.

Eight days later John and Yoko married in secret in Gibraltar.

“Linda wasn’t too sure about getting married,” Paul later told his biographer Barry Miles. “She’d been married before and it hadn’t worked out and I had to reassure her that it would be all right with me.” Five months after Paul and Linda’s marriage, their daughter Mary was born.

Paul may have loved Linda but the fans didn’t. And they made it immediately clear. Linda was not welcome. They wanted a bachelor Paul.

It had to explode and it did. In a screaming row in November 1969 in the boardroom at their Apple headquarters, from where money had been haemorrhaging for two years, John told Paul he wanted a divorce from the Beatles.

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Paul went to the edge of a breakdown when the Beatles broke up. He would lie in bed all day, a musician without a group, a man without a job, wondering what the point was in getting up. He had nowhere to go to. He didn't wash much or shave. He drank too much. Linda watched and worried.

Hiding himself away at his austere, windswept farm in Scotland, with just Linda and their two children, he tried to disappear from the world in the mud and the rain. Not answering phone calls, resolutely refusing to call Apple, the Beatles' company he'd set up with such pride and expectations only three years earlier, he sank to the depths of depression.

Paul had always loved the Beatles as much as any fan, but now as the kaleidoscopic Sixties, which he'd done so much to colour, turned bleakly into the Seventies, he found himself locked out from all those who had been his friends and colleagues.

Feeling friendless, angry and paranoid, he even threatened poor Ringo when the drummer called round at his London house on a goodwill mission as the peacemaker for the other two Beatles. "I'll finish you all," he screamed at the placid drummer. "I'll *get* you!" Then he threw him out.

Days later, recounting the episode, he was full of remorse. He told me: "I called him everything under the sun. But it's all business. I don't want to fall out with Ringo. I like Ringo. I think he's great. We're all talking about peace and love but really we're not feeling peaceful at all."

Later he was to explain: “I had to assert myself because I was just sinking. Linda was very helpful, she was saying ‘look you don’t have to take all this crap. You’re a grown man!’ I was getting pummelled about my head in my mind.”

It was all going wrong. Everything about the Beatles was coming apart so quickly he could hardly believe it. He felt he had no control over Beatles records anymore, and when one of his best songs, *The Long And Winding Road*, had strings and a women’s choir overdubbed on to it by Phil Spector without his even being consulted, he was in despair. “I would *never* have a woman’s choir on a Beatles record,” he said, flushed with anger.

When I told John how upset Paul was about this, he professed amazement, claiming that the record had been improved, and that Paul should have been in touch and spoken up earlier if he hadn’t liked the finished result.

The fact that Lennon and McCartney were so out of touch spoke volumes for their relationship at the time. Not only was Paul’s confidence shattered, he was also mentally exhausted. After seven years of a staggering work load (something like 150 new songs written and recorded, many of which had already become standards, years of touring, hysteria and headlines, three movies, countless radio and TV appearances), all four of the Beatles must have been close to collapse. They did indeed need a break. But not like this. Then suddenly, just like every other Beatle fans in the world, all Paul had were memories. The Beatles broke up.

“I thought I wasn’t worth anything any more, that I was useless, on the scrap heap, that my life was over,” he told me later. “I’d never done anything but be a Beatle. That was my job and now I was unemployed.”

Linda said: “It was frightening beyond belief.” She and Paul had been together for less than two years.

It was very untypical of Paul McCartney to lose heart. Though he may be prone to moods, he is someone who never gives up, who goes on and on until he gets what he wants. His father used to say, “God loves a tryer”, and Paul never stops trying. He’s a perfectionist and a workaholic. How else could he have produced so much by the time he was 28?

Now he seriously needed help. And it came from Linda. She bucked him up, convinced him of his talent, and with their two children, Heather,

from Linda's first marriage, and their baby, Mary, she gently led him out of the depression.

"It was Linda who made me realise what a complete fool I was," he said. "She used to say 'come on, Paul, you're not worthless. Think of what you've done. Think of all the great songs you've written.'"

Gradually the light of ambition came back. The answer to the depression lay in work. But he couldn't work with the Beatles again, he couldn't even speak to them. So, borrowing a simple four track tape recorder from the Abbey Road studios, he set out to make an album on his own. Working at home or getting Linda to book them into a small studio, he would play all the instruments himself, the baby with a bottle of grape juice on the floor, Heather, then aged seven, playing with a toy.

Linda, though not a musician, provided some of the harmonies, and most of the inspiration. The very first song was called *The Lovely Linda (with the lovely flowers in her hair).*

The resulting album, *McCartney*, didn't sell anything like as well as the final Beatles album, *Let It Be*, which, after a long delay, had come out a few weeks earlier in the spring of l970, but there were some good songs on it: *Junk, Maybe I'm Amazed* and *Every Night*. The self confidence was edging back. Now, with the Beatles publicly dead, he began to rebuild his career. This time, however, it was to be very different.

The Beatles and their entourage had always been a totally male society, four young princes surrounded by friends who'd become employees. But since his marriage and depression there'd been a revolution in Paul's mind. From now on the family would become the centre of everything he did, play and work. It became almost a philosophical stance. Life was to be simple and uncluttered. Linda always said that she was really a peasant, so now they became rich peasants.

Paul learned to sheer sheep and do woodwork; Linda, the sophisticatedly brought up daughter of a wealthy lawyer, did the cooking and housework, the latter not, apparently, over-enthusiastically. They could have afforded an army of domestic staff, but that would have meant being more than ordinary, as well as sharing their family with outsiders.

Much of that time was spent at their home in Scotland, which they began to gradually renovate…doing it themselves, Paul even concreting the floors. He'd bought the isolated High Park Farm, near Campbeltown years

earlier as an escape from Beatlemania and never bothered to do much with it, apart from buying some second hand furniture, and making a couch out of some old wooden potato boxes with a mattress thrown over them. Semi-derelict, it consisted of three rooms and a few outbuildings. Near a small loch it had a remoteness which seemed to Linda to be at the end of nowhere.

"It was so beautiful, clean, so different from the hotels and limousines and the music business, so it was quite a relief to be there," she said.

When Paul couldn't be there or at his house in London, he took home with him, trailing the family along, carrying the baby in his arms right into the recording studios in New York while he made his second solo album, *Ram*. They were like a band of gypsies, ragamuffin new age travellers, shorn of hangers-on, with Linda making the phone calls to book the musicians and studio time.

But even this involvement of family wasn't enough. Paul had always played on stage with his best friend. He couldn't play with John Lennon anymore, so he turned his new best friend, Linda, into a keyboard musician in his new group, Wings…named the night of the birth of their third daughter, Stella, in September 13, 1971. "She was a Caesarian baby and in intensive care and I was sitting around trying to think of uplifting thoughts and came up with the name Wings," he would explain.

Setting off as a family and band the following February on an impromptu tour of colleges across England, they would turn up unannounced and offer to play like any little pub band. Then, staying in bed and breakfast places and eating at fish and chip shops, they would divide the takings at the end of the night.

For Paul, already a multi-millionaire, the only explanation for the tour is that it was in some way cathartic, going back to the beginning, something he'd actually suggested the Beatles do, only to be told by John that he was being daft. Nottingham University was the first stop, in February 1972.

Though pleased to see Paul on stage again, it has to be said, fans were less than convinced about his wife's inclusion in the band. Having already been demonised for having the temerity to marry the man she loved, she was now further vilified for becoming an instant musician. If she thought the fans behaviour had been vile to her on her marriage, it was to get a lot worse. The public just didn't take to her.